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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000595

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DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/16/2017
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [BO](#) [RU](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: DEMARCHE DELIVERED: CAUTIONING AZERBAIJAN AGAINST
CLOSER RELATIONS WITH BELARUS

REF: A. BAKU 568

[B](#). STATE 61831

[C](#). STATE 63345

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse per 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#). (C) As reported ref a, the Ambassador delivered ref b demarche cautioning Azerbaijan against closer relations with Belarus in separate May 10 conversations with President Aliyev's Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev, who said he would inform President Aliyev, and Foreign Policy Advisor Novruz Mammadov, as well as Deputy Foreign Minister Mahmud Mammadgulyev and on May 11 with Deputy Foreign Minister Khalafov. In all four conversations, the Ambassador underscored the importance of this issue to the US-Azerbaijan bilateral relationship, noting that democratic countries should not be seen as supportive of Belarus' repressive policies. She also urged Azerbaijan not to support Belarus' candidacy for the UN Human Rights Council, a message she subsequently reinforced with Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov in a May 14 conversation. Azimov (who is responsible for UN issues in the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry) said he does not know whether Azerbaijan had promised its vote to Belarus. He explained that Azerbaijan in all likelihood had decided this issue six to 12 months earlier, as Azerbaijan regularly swaps votes on UN issues in exchange for support on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Azimov said that Azerbaijan votes in the UN "on the basis of pragmatic interests," and it may be too late to change its position on Belarus, UNHRC candidacy. Azimov promised to consult Foreign Minister Mammadyarov and confirm whether Azerbaijan had a commitment to Belarus. In a May 15 conversation, Azimov informed the Ambassador he had not yet been able to reach Mammadyarov, who is in Islamabad for an OIC conference.

[2](#). (C) Separately, Pol/Econ Chief delivered ref b and c demarches to Rahman Mustafayev, Director of the MFA's First Territorial Division (the division responsible for bilateral relations with the Americas, Europe and the CIS) on May 15. Pol/Econ Chief also underscored the importance of the issue to our bilateral relationship, noting that Azerbaijan's support for the Lukashenko regime contradicts Azerbaijan's stated goals of democratization and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. It is difficult to understand how Azerbaijan can pursue "strategic partnerships" with both Belarus and the United States.

[3](#). (C) Mustafayev argued that Belarus is making a strategic shift away from Russia and it is therefore incumbent upon Western-oriented states such as Azerbaijan to reach out to Belarus. Mustafayev said that Belarus over the last two to

three years has increasingly asserted its independence from Russia and is now actively seeking improved relations with states such as Azerbaijan and Ukraine in order to bolster its position vis-a-vis Russia. Pulling out his notes from Lukashenko's visit, Mustafayev said he was very surprised to hear Lukashenko making thinly veiled anti-Russian statements throughout the visit. During various signing ceremonies, for example, Lukashenko said, "this is necessary to show our neighbors what we think" and "this is necessary for both our countries' independence." These comments, Mustafayev noted, have come from the same man who previously had argued for unification with Russia. He asked whether it was better to leave Belarus alone with Russia or engage it in a network of independent-minded states such as Azerbaijan.

14. (C) Mustafayev also argued that Azerbaijan would benefit from greater economic engagement with Belarus. Characterizing Lukashenko's visit to Baku as "very successful" in this regard, Mustafayev said that the two countries had signed several important agreements, particularly in the heavy machinery sector. Azerbaijan seeks to revitalize its long dormant manufacturing sector, and Belarus has expertise and investment that can help. Azerbaijan in turn could be an important market for Belarus' industrial sector. Belarus, Mustafayev said, has the capacity to be a manufacturing powerhouse; wouldn't economic growth, stimulated by trade with states such as Azerbaijan, ultimately lead to the sort of democratic reform in Belarus that the West seeks?

15. (C) Pol/Econ Chief responded that Azerbaijan's analysis of Belarus' changing foreign policy priorities was interesting, and that we would appreciate any further insights into Lukashenko's thoughts. However, the US and the EU had pursued a policy of constructive engagement with

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Lukashenko for years and determined that it was not effective. Belarus is by far the most repressive regime in Europe, and Azerbaijan's interests -- particularly its goals of Euro-Atlantic integration and strong relations with the United States -- are not served by close relations with Belarus.
DERSE